

VIEWERS' CHOICE

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This paper documents the execution and exhibition of a group of oil paintings exploring themes of spectacle and the construction of reality in contemporary American society. The paintings are composed of figures and fragments of text originating in stills taken from television news and reality TV. This paper describes and assesses the paintings according to a set of questions developed by the artist at the inception of the project. Various strategies employed in the execution of the work are analyzed and compared. The contribution of this project to the field of contemporary visual art is evaluated via comparison with other art, past and present, expressing similar concerns.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“That’s quite an armband you’ve got there. What does SIMUVAC mean? Sounds important.”

“Short for simulated evacuation. A new state program they’re still battling over funds for.”

“But this evacuation isn’t simulated. It’s real.”

“We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model.”

“A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation?”

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Like the protagonist of DeLillo’s novel, I too am bemused by the spectacle. In my case, and in the case of most Americans, our spectacle comes in the form of television. In its perpetual quest to, in the very least mimic life, and in its most extreme, to stand in for it, I have observed that television tells all--to the detriment of its original intent. Consider the way television news now showcases “ordinary people” in an attempt to provide the human angle. What began as bites of witnesses commenting on a news story has expanded to full scale interviews on news programs like *Today* and even feature stories with serial coverage on shows such as *Dateline*. The urge to explicate the effect of news events on humans has come to eclipse the actual reporting of the event. Interviews with victims or people associated with notorious figures fill the ubiquitous news magazine programs replete with platitudes supplied both by interviewer and interviewee.

How do you put into words what it feels like to have lost a loved one? What magical phrase could possibly impart their special qualities? How do you describe the boy next door who decided one day to assault his high school with an arsenal of

weapons? Or is it the images that are supposed to shed light on these human mysteries? How much can a facial expression, gesture, outfit, hairstyle reveal to us? Even sports have come to include the human angle in its coverage. Not only do you have the play by play during the event, you have color commentary by retired players and coaches as well as occasional features on individual players, coaches, and sometimes owners and fans. It's called human interest, and it's intended to help us humans understand ourselves and others a little better.

One of the more fascinating forms of this evolution toward more human interest is the talk show format. In the beginning there were two kinds of talk shows: those that covered current events, particularly politics such as *Meet the Press*; and those that employed a charming and witty host such as Jack Paar of *The Tonight Show* and Merv Griffith of his show by the same name. The former kind would interview politicians and prominent journalists to discuss current events, and the latter would host celebrities in a (then) rare display of casual conversation. At some point a shift began to occur in the entertainment brand of talk show in which the guest lineup evolved from celebrities (*Dinah*) to "experts" (*Oprah*) to "ordinary people" with unusual problems (*Sally Jesse Raphael*). Reality TV was born in the benevolent and civic minded form of *Donahue*, but it would quickly evolve into the hostile and reactionary *Morton Downey Jr. Show*, introducing to a national audience an alternative model of human speech and behavior. Soon to follow would be the maudlin *Montel* and *Maury Povitch* which, transfigured by camp, would become *Rikki Lake* and *Jerry Springer*.

What intrigues me about *Jerry Springer* is that it seems to represent the entertainment talk show format come full circle where guests are supposedly "real people" but look and behave so outrageously, common belief holds them to actually be "actors" portraying "real people." If true, these people, while not the celebrities of the

first generation talk shows, present ironic parallels to those original guests. Instead of the typical actor, astonishingly attractive and generally well-behaved, we have ordinary people who are pretending to be other ordinary people (albeit strange) or a more outrageous version of themselves. This kind of play acting could be akin to the employment of an alter ego, the role playing of psychotherapy, the pretending of children, karaoke, burlesque, and erotic fantasy.

I am fascinated by the human need to suspend reality and view and sometimes even participate in this kind of play acting. In the format of the talk show, the audience has evolved into a significant participatory element. Beginning with *Donahue*, audience participation was in the form of questions structured to allow equal time to the studio and to telephone viewers at home. The audience of *Morton Downey Jr.* was more active. This audience, predominantly young, white, male and working class, was typically angry and very vocal, at times standing and shouting with fists waving (Shattuc 1997). Shows like *Montel* frequently display camera shots of sections of the audience, sometimes of about a dozen people and sometimes a single person or a couple. The people are always engrossed and sometimes very emotional, shaking their heads or wiping a tear. The camera reveals a range of demographics: age, gender, and race are equitably spotlighted. There is a focus, however, on young, pretty women with savvy hairstyles and trendy clothing. In addition to emotionally cuing the audience at home, these images validate the importance of the show's purpose and its relevance to all our lives.

By far the most active audience is that of *Jerry Springer* which reigns judgement on individual guests in the form of reproaches chanted in unison, sort of like a Greek chorus. This brand of participation reminds me of an article I read discussing Shakespeare in nineteenth century American theater (Levine 1984, 42-3) in which the upper class audience was seated in the balcony and the lower class counterpart below and

near the stage. The upper class audience then had a view, not only of the stage and its players, but of the immediate audience below and the spectacle they provided of interacting with the actors. When displeased, the lower class audience would shout obscenities and hurl rotten food. The upper class audience above could then pretend to be scandalized by such brutish behavior. Likewise, the television audience of talk shows views the studio audience with supercilious disapproval.

My experience with this kind of audience participation came when, as a bored suburban teenager, I would drive downtown to the midnight showing of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. My friends and I would delight more in the audience's costumes, refrains and, antics than in the actual movie. And we were never tempted to participate ourselves. We could vicariously enjoy the abandon of the downtown crowd and, at the same time, hold a certain amount of disdain for their more earnest efforts.

I continue to observe and experience the same phenomenon at sporting events and concerts. There are people who can totally lose themselves in the event: paint their faces, wear jerseys, dance in the aisles, and sing along. But I just can't do it. And it's not even that I'm afraid I'm going to slip and fall in a puddle of beer. It's because I just can't bear someone thinking I'm that *into* it. Los Angeles artist Andrea Bowers loves this kind of stuff. It seems pretty clear she's not just making fun. There's a smidgeon of envy in her images of fandom. Well I think there might be something of the same thing present in my abashed viewing of *Jerry Springer* and even shows like *Montel*. It's that I wish I could be that free. With *Montel* what's required is more a gross lack of emotional sophistication and that is not the same thing as emotional freedom so that's probably to be avoided. But those *Springer* people... they're just having loads of fun.

I'm equally interested in reality television such as *Cops* and *Police Videos* and I

think it's because it's another form of the slice of life story. There is no visible audience in these formats but I would think audience reception is not dissimilar to that of talk shows. I don't exactly scorn or laugh at the "guests," and I don't really feel sorry for these people, though I probably worry about them a little. It's mostly a resigned acceptance, like the aunt who's been married three times and just cheated her former employer out of workman's comp. You still can't bring yourself to disown her. They sort of charm you with their "Ratso Rizzo" vulnerability and false pride. Just when you start to believe one of them is actually capable of a legitimate crime, the camera pans down from some shirtless torso and reveals this poor bastard with his shoes on the wrong feet.

Television news has been present in my life for as long as I can remember, and I started painting from news stills about five years ago. The motivation began as a way to ameliorate the disillusion I experienced teaching English in an inner city middle school. And as an added bonus, I thought this social issue art would surely get me some much deserved attention in the artworld. These days I approach such images with caution knowing I am prone to preach. But I'm still attracted to them because they reflect my interest in current events and American culture, and most importantly, they evoke a sense of the public realm.

Most people describe television as escape, but I've come to realize, for me, it is something very different. Television is part of my everyday life and routine. It is on almost always in my home as a backdrop or probably more accurately as a filter through which I go about the routine of my daily life. And it's possible that it levels out the highs and lows of a life. Whether I'm eating dinner, vacuuming, opening the mail, grading papers, or receiving dire news from a loved one over the telephone, the flow of images and language washes over everything. Likewise, the intensity of the news, dulled through repetition, is sometimes made real when it is filtered through the routine of my life.

Fairly recently there was a tribute on the news to the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing. It concluded with an alphabetical sequence of pictures and labels of each person who died. At around the B's I was already on to something else: organizing papers on my desk. I filed and discarded a number of items before I looked up and realized the list had progressed only to the letter G. This cycle continued until the end of the alphabet, leaving me slightly astonished--first at the progress I had made in finally clearing a good portion of my desk, and then at the sheer number of people who lost their lives that day, which I was finally able to gauge because of the business with my desk.

So television, for me, is not escape but painting is, justifying my retreat to an interior life. And I love the look of painting--the sensuality of the colors and surfaces, the velvet edges of wet into wet. This, in itself, is enough to keep me working as an artist. But I'm a thinking person as much as I am a visual one. This leads me back to television, which I consider to be the opposite of painting, because when I am painting I have no access to television. And if painting is my escape from the world, television is my link to it, and surprisingly, I desperately crave this kind of inclusion: a sense of myself as part of the public realm. I suppose it is an extension (or perversion) of Baudelaire's art of being alone in a crowd (Baudelaire 1965)--something I sorely miss sense leaving the city.

Okay, so I enjoy the comfort of (virtual) strangers. Whether television mitigates alienation or perpetuates it, it does provide a forum in which to observe human behavior. And I've come to believe (in agreement with research on audience reception of television news by Mark Levy, 1978) that what is generally considered passive viewing is often a much more active form of perceiving inclusion or even interaction. Yet, as my opening states, the more television tries to present the complete picture of the human experience--to the extent of eliciting participation (note *America's Most Wanted* which relies on audience phone-in tips, or *Dateline/Court TV* which asks viewers to vote on

guilt/innocence)-- the less its depiction seems authentic. Do we simply become desensitized to the multifarious presentations of human life (and death)? If so, I suspect the way to evince lived experience through art then is to show (and tell) less. Perhaps it is the fragments--captured in video stills and closed-caption sequences--that hold the potential to intimate the feeling of lived human experience. The arena of painting is where I choose to reenact these images and voices of our time.

Language and storytelling round out the scope of my interests as an artist. I can't say that I grew up reading and writing the way I did drawing and looking at pictures but I did okay. Attending University of Houston and earning a minor in English via creative writing at a time when the program enlisted such prestigious writers as Donald Barthelme and Edward Albee certainly didn't hurt. There was a time in my undergraduate career when I was spending as much time at the typewriter and at book readings as in my studio and at art openings. Then one day I walked into the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston and it happened to be featuring the work of Vernon Fisher. I had encountered the concept of text in visual art but hadn't liked it much. But I, being the dutiful student, always read everything. Vernon's work was different because it was funny, colloquial, and more importantly for a working class suburban girl whose encounters with the artworld had been meted out in the form of field trips in elementary school, it was unpretentious and not exactly like the Art I was being forcefed. It also combined the three things I love: images, paint, and stories.

Oddly, I didn't run out and start juxtaposing text from my writing with images from my paintings. I don't remember it even occurring to me. I kept on writing and reading while I continued painting and looking. It was only about five years ago when I experimented with a line of text in a few paintings, and only so I could make sure I had

inculcated my didactic message about the crisis in the public education system.

Interestingly, my instructor at the time pointed me to Vernon's work as an example of an artist who uses text in a visual format with success. It was at this time that I was applying to graduate schools, and when I had to decide where to go, only then did I think that it might be fruitful to come to University of North Texas and study with Vernon. It was at most a passing thought.

Last spring I became interested once again in combining text and image in painting. I had been engaged in a series of self portraits but decided to return to more public images from television news. The text consisted of lines taken from novels and short stories I was reading. They seemed to affirm the image but not exactly take on the role of caption/illustration. Last summer this text evolved into short narratives taken from memory. My interest was to juxtapose the private (text) with the public (television image). But like my proclivity to preach when it comes to politics, I have a tendency to tell all as regards my autobiographical narratives. This brings us back to the idea of the fragment. What could embody the essence of fragment more than a single video still snatched from the infinite cycling of images that constitute the flow of television?

Above all else, television is characterized by its flowing nature (Williams 2000, 231). People fear and resent this because it pulls you in, not just for one program, but often for several hours. And while this and other objections are understandable, it could be that television is an apt source for addressing the protean nature of postmodern American culture. A sampling of the persistent memory of my own relatively short life might qualify my conjecture. One early association I have with my father is the metal cigarette lighter and the distinctive click it would make as his thumb flipped the cap. At ten, I am still several years from taking the wheel of an automobile but already confronting the reality that I may never drive due to the escalation of the energy crisis.

My dad is no longer flipping his metal cigarette lighter because it has been replaced by a spate of plastic colored disposable lighters. By the time I am beginning college, disposable lighters, razors, and even ballpoint pens are becoming not only passe but politically incorrect. Metal lighters and razors, and for the avid earthday fan, fountain pens suddenly become quaint. Today I *am* driving and it's not a gas-guzzling SUV. Who would have thought such vehicles could become so popular? Though our nation soon realized the hyperbole in the fear of depleting the world's oil reserves, a shift to gas economizing cars was imminent. Not quite two years ago we saw a sharp increase in gasoline prices and now the SUV is being questioned for its lack of fuel efficiency. There has also been word of rebates and other incentives to encourage the purchase of hybrid automobiles with dual solar/battery power and gasoline backup.

Did I mention it is once again okay to eat eggs and salt? And while you're at it enjoy a beer or glass of wine with your evening meal. The ennui of modernity has evolved into the neurosis of postmodernism, but we have known this for some time. If at the dawn of this uncertain era it was perceived arrogant, even dishonest to hold convictions (Smith 1968), maybe it is now acceptable to embrace a belief or idea with cautionary awareness that we must remain adaptable to the revised information that is constantly altering our perceptions. It very well could be this cautionary awareness that drives my interest in the willing suspension of disbelief, play acting and elisions television presents between reality and illusion. If so, the impulse to intercept the moving image and the rolling text of closed- caption sequence might be to create a lab, or better yet a playground for exploring the conventions of storytelling. The resultant objective would then be to increase the possibility of fomenting new meanings vital for today.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

I would like to investigate the nature of images originating from television in the genres of news, talk shows, and other forms of reality TV. My objective is to understand the narrative and emotional potential of the television still when translated into painting. Likewise, this same investigation extends to language. I want to explore dialogue and how it changes when, for instance, it is in the form of conversation compared with that of an interview. I am interested in the vernacular and in the variety of tones that come with various contexts; for example, humor, politics, sports, or military. I will look into the range of forms taken within expository language: the monologue, the speech, play by play, news reports.

In addition, through the artificial form of the closed-caption sequence, my interest in language has come to include descriptions of sound effects. Translating this purely auditory experience into a visual one of language has a rather disarming effect. Even though the intent is not the same, I wonder if it can be compared to the “alienation techniques” advanced by Bertolt Brecht which sought to jar the audience and separate them from a personal identification with the characters/actors (Feuer 1992, 154). The intent was to amplify the theme of the story, and I suspect it might have a similar effect in my paintings.

I have also stumbled onto a variation of language that might be worth exploring. When I pause my VCR it sometimes intercepts the closed-captioning in such a way that results in a flashing pattern of fragmented words and symbols. It is very appealing on a graphic level, especially since the text appears in odd bright colors. Combined with the other kinds of text, I would like to explore their potential for meaning. In short, the problem will involve not only how to combine text with image and how to paint it, it will also involve choosing different kinds of images and language and the numerous

possibilities of their combinations therein. Some of these concerns may be addressed with the following questions:

1. What is the meaning of using images from news and reality based television?
2. How notorious and thus recognizable should a news item or television show be? How does this element affect its meaning?
3. How can text be used without invoking the usual function of caption/illustration and/or dialogue balloon?
4. How is text accounted for as a visual component of the painting?
5. What is the effect of combining images from one source with text from another?
6. Should the juxtaposition of text and image address closed-caption sequences and television graphics?
7. How should video images printed via laserprinter translate into painting as regards color and pixels?
8. How do these paintings relate to paintings of the past and present (Goya, Warhol, Golub, Fisher)?

METHODOLOGY

To explore these questions I will make six to ten paintings ranging in the approximate size of forty-eight inches in height by sixty-four inches in width. I will compile a notebook of video stills, mock ups, dictations, and notations to order and record my thinking in constructing these paintings. Each of the above questions will be discussed in light of the entire body of work and these reflections will be articulated in a paper which documents the concluding exhibition of these paintings in a gallery setting.

CHAPTER 2

DESCRIPTION

Completion of this project has brought me to the vexing conclusion that not only is the meaning of using images from television news and reality shows in painting complex, exploring this issue raises more questions than can be adequately addressed within the platform of this conclusion. Setting forth the most salient observations will have to suffice. Initially, meaning begins with a sense of familiarity or at least that of a shared experience. Most everyone watches at least some amount of television and recognizes this type of fragmented imagery recorded, unadorned, by the television news camera and presented without regard for the traditional editing concerns of sequence and pacing (Oldham 1992, 307).

The first painting of this series, *Old Times*, takes cues from this method of operation. Multiple literary quotations guide the selection of the three news stills which are butted against each other storyboard fashion. What is left of the picture plane is painted in colors analogous to the scheme of the three stills. One of these is painted in a style unlike the other two stills which are painted in a straightforward and realistic manner. The quotations speak of life as a simulation, “existing only on videotape” and of the anxiety of its transience, the possibility that “we would all be erased forever” (DeLillo, 1989). The images strongly relate to the text but stop short of perfunctory illustration.

The painting *Sport* is the closest thing to a complete news still that has simply been painted on a large scale. A slice of one still has been pasted onto the top of another frame to complete the head of the mounted police officer. There are a couple of reasons I

chose to alter this news frame. The original video still frame proportions did not match the stretcher frame I had previously built. Obviously I could have built another frame, but there are those rare occasions when I relent my control of the creative process to practical matters. Also, I preferred the posture of the mounted police officer of one frame to the stance of the horse of another frame. I decided to not camouflage the splicing to see how it might more directly invoke the moving image and the television format, so there is a visible line where the frames have been combined.

Another reference to the video image is the way in which the brushstrokes and marks of drawing and painting mimic the pixilation of the video still. Also, the narrow, singular strip of text at the bottom of the painting comes from the device of the streaming text used by network news to publish up-to-date headlines. This device, while not intended to connect the headlines to the central news stories being simultaneously broadcast with visual footage and anchored narration, has presented a format in which to explore the caption/illustration function automatically ascribed when images and words are combined.

Siren is another painting in which the single news still has been presented but altered in yet a different way. The still that serves as the basis of this painting freezes a dissolve between an image of women walking in Afghanistan veiled with burkas to a closing shot of Tom Brokaw. He has just signed off and looks down at his script while the *NBC Nightly News* logo surfaces over his left shoulder. This primary image is altered by text fragments which are presented as closed captioned sequences and by painting elements such as color, brushwork, and abstraction.

The figures in the painting *Waiting* are also taken from the news. Originally painted with the entire background as in *Sport*, I remade this painting to isolate the figures onto a lemon yellow field. The result comes across as more staged and theatrical.

The emotional body language and facial gestures of the figures are grounded by the prosaic reality of the news image and of the personal narrative which is painted as a matter of fact.

These figures are liberated from their contexts in later paintings such as *Petal*, *Hit and Run*, and *The Big Story* and are free to act as advocate or foil to one another. This reinforces some aspects of the narrative text while confounding other parts of it. Sometimes the text and images come together to suggest a storyline. In *Petal*, the text came first and innocently enough as a question on a diaper rash commercial and a descriptive sound effect in the closed-caption sequence of an episode of a sit com. Combining these texts suggested sexual perversity so I looked for images that would correspond in some way: mug shot, mounted police (law enforcement and soft fur), a pair of young girls in tank tops (salacious) contrasts with another pair concealed with veils (chaste), and finally, a confrontational woman who is quite literally given voice via the microphone thrust in her face.

The numerous images in *The Big Story* are catalogued to give evidence to the wisdom that is revealed in the joke originally told in the opening monologue of *The Tonight Show* about the President's mishap with a pretzel: menacing forces come in unexpected forms. My experiences as an inner city educator came back into play in this painting, and with the distraction of politics and humor, I was finally able to address these news images that had before, presented as a single image, a *painted* news still, if you will, came on too strong in my paintings. The point of this painting is a catalogue of visual evidence, and the point of that *is* to come on strong, as in a barrage.

The point of *Hit and Run* did not become clear to me until halfway into the painting. The headline under the news still of President G. W. Bush is real. I did not combine this headline although, I doubt anyone will believe this. The combination is

such an obvious contrivance, yet I didn't even read the headline until I was actually painting it. I selected the image because it complimented the idea of having fun which was outlined as a theme by the text fragment. I also wanted the image because it made a president, who is supposed to appear stately, look rather silly. This image also brought to mind a much more infamous image of a driver, Michael Dukakis, helmeted and behind the wheel of a military tank. Ironically, (and I am just now realizing *this* coincidence as I write) it was George Bush, Sr. who employed this image to successfully render Dukakis an unworthy presidential candidate. I also included this image to test the question of notoriety in a news image. But the real point of this painting has asserted itself as another facet of spectacle. That is, fictions are sometimes created to explain realities that appear too unrealistic to believe. As the saying goes, truth is stranger than fiction. This is why I decided to keep the pairing of headline and image even though most people will just think I made a really bad joke.

The remaining paintings are made from stills of the talk show *Jerry Springer*. The meaning of these paintings also begins with familiarity. Whether or not we want to own up to it, most of us have seen enough of this dubious but pervasive genre to recognize and understand the purpose of camera shots of audiences such as that depicted in *Stand & Deliver*, or unfortunately, of women half-dressed as in *Exhale*, *Blue Angel*, and *Little Women*. There are tell-tale signs, such as the microphones attached to bras and censor grids blocking salacious parts. Some of us will even recognize the familiar bald head of Steve, the popular bouncer who has become almost as famous as the host of the show, Jerry himself, who is also visible and recognizable in *Exhale*. He is captured here as he so often is seen in the show, in an oddly casual stride, head down, microphone in one hand, blue index cards in the other.

The recognizability of these elements and the association with *Jerry Springer* are

something of which I am extremely wary. Like the news headline in *Hit and Run*, this can be too easily exploited. I work with these images, nonetheless, because I feel they speak of something profound in not only contemporary American culture, but in humanity itself. The fact that viewers will have an immediate association with the images of television news and reality shows, and to some degree their presentation, is akin to pop art. This initial association is a superficial one, and I can only hope viewers will entertain the paintings enough to allow more complex layers to reveal themselves. I do not consider myself a pop artist because this association is not my purpose, but I'm willing to chance the pigeonholing because, like pop artists, I acknowledge the vitality and importance of popular culture as a vehicle to express basic human needs and desires.

A few technical matters should be explored here beginning with just how these video images as laserprints might translate into painting regarding brushwork, color, and pixels. Some of the paintings, such as *Sport* and *Exhale*, are painted in a fairly straightforward manner. Certain idiosyncracies of the video and laserprinter domain are manifested primarily in the way modeling of value takes on particular patterns of shape and in the alteration of color. I decided to keep a fidelity to the value shapes because they are distinct and, though not necessarily identifiable as a video/laserprinter source, nonetheless visually interesting and conceptually viable as something novel and removed from painting.

Color has been another matter that has presented its own set of problems. Color degenerates in the first translation from television to videotape and then again from videotape to computer capture device and one last time to laserprint. Yes, I could become a computer *tekkie* and learn how to compensate for this degeneration, and I have spent a slight amount of time attempting this. In the end, my preference for the studio and my desire to reassert painting as a viable pictorial format ultimately win out. In both of the

aforementioned paintings, the color is based on the actual color of the original video still. There are also areas, however, that have been tweaked. In the case of *Sport*, the cadmium yellow raincoat and the ultramarine blue piping of the horses's blanket seem to be a factual attribute of painting. Why mix or dilute these colors that are so obviously straight from the tube? Why repaint these areas to conceal the fact of the white canvas serving as ground? I wasn't so conscious of it at the time, but now I think this agenda was directing the technical decisions. In *Exhale*, I was more concerned with turning up the volume of everything, mostly crowding, of people, stage set, and closed caption sequences but also of color. And I wanted to take advantage of what paintings do best: appeal to our visual sense and vibrant colors are an obvious vehicle.

These motives are stridently evident in *Stand & Deliver* where the pixel shapes of the video image, amplified in the larger scale of the painting, articulate both the figural composition and the modeling of the central faces. Color has been exaggerated and in some instances replaced to diminish or even eliminate neutrality. The result brings to mind the question that has plagued my work from the beginning: Why paint these video images? Why are they not simply presented as stills or combined in some form of video? The answer for me has always been obvious: I want to paint. This leads me to the paintings *Little Women*, *Waiting*, and *The Blue Celica* which were painted before *Stand & Deliver* but addressed more of a traditional drawing and painting approach. The figures in these paintings are defined by drawing and revision. They are removed from their original context and placed on a pastel colorfield ground. The text, at least visually, becomes just another painted *thing* in the painting. There is a real artificiality to the color enhancement of the figurative half of the diptych *The Blue Celica*. The garish teal shirt and "Pepto Bismol" pink of the background compliment the tackiness of the talk show format. The serenity of the blue sky in the equally colorful landscape half of the piece is

respite.

To finally answer the question of how to paint from this pixilated source, I reflected on some artists who paint from photographic sources and whose paintings I had seen in museums recently: Gerhard Richter, Richard Patterson, Veja, Celmins, and Ed Ruscha. I knew right away I did not want to address the photographic source within the realm of Richter and Patterson. Celmins and Ruscha presented an approach I had a harder time dismissing. Their painting did not draw attention to itself and yet the fact that these images were painted was undeniably present. The painterly touch was what I had found to be lacking in this work. But what if the painterly brushwork was diminishing the video component? What if the brushstrokes painted in the form of pixelation failed to convey this source? In the end, I concluded the issue to be a matter of noise, and the volume was just too high when I painted the images with amplified pixilation or with exaggerated brushwork. The figures in my most recent work, *Blue Angel*, *Petal*, *Hit and Run*, and *The Big Story* are the best solution. I'm not sure if it is the smaller scale or the liberation of the figure from its original context, but these figures are painted with a certainty of purpose that lays any question to rest. I am still slightly surprised at the vitality of these little figures as each begins to emerge. When I look back to the video source, I realize it is the paint and the hand, my hand, that breathes life into these renderings.

Another central question is how the text should be accounted for as a visual component of the paintings. My first attempt at text in the painting *Old Times* was to try and layer or somehow incorporate the text into the painting. This materialized in the form of text that was written with paint onto sheets of glassine which were then pressed onto the wet oil paint of the images underneath. One of these sheets was banded over the torsos of the figures, because I didn't want the text to appear separate. I also wanted to avoid the conventions of caption and illustration such pairing of image and text usually

evokes. In *Sport*, the text was placed within the graphics of television news; the time and temperature are displayed along with the streaming headline. Closed-caption sequences provide another avenue to introduce text. I think it is more complex and interesting than the dialogue balloon of the comic strip; however, it ushers in with it all the spurious associations of novelty and exploitation that come with poaching images from television.

This textual device facilitated innovations in the visual format of my paintings. *Exhale* was the first of the paintings since *Old Times* that attempted to integrate the placement of the text with the figurative elements. It also increased the scale of the letters and of the rectangular bands that framed the text. In *Siren* the text broke loose from the three-line blocks customarily used by this system and attempted to mimic the spontaneous flashing and placement of the blocks when the VCR is paused. This is also the only painting which replicated the television version of the black ground and brightly colored or white letters. In *Stand & Deliver*, the letters are again black, but the banded background is yellow. Technically, I struggled with the text in *Siren* because I discovered white or colored letters on a black or dark gray ground are not aesthetically appealing. It has something to do with the edges and how they appear cloudy. The strips of text, whatever the color, were all executed the same way: wet into wet. The edges created by the dark letters on the light grounds however, somehow blur and smear in a way that is sensuous and appealing.

This may correspond with how we read the smearing of rich black charcoal or the layering of ink washes on a ground of white paper. But I think it also has something to do with the look, once created by typewriters, of black typefaces on paper. I don't know that nostalgia is necessarily playing a role here. For one thing, that look of the typed letter is still widely used in advertising, television, and film graphics. I've also seen people too young to have much memory of typewriters respond to the look of this lettering. I think it

is simply aesthetically pleasing in a fundamental way similar to that of a Franz Kline or Robert Motherwell.

In the earlier paintings *Little Women*, *Waiting*, and *The Blue Celica*, the areas of text still referenced the blocks or captions seen in comic strips. These autobiographical narratives were longer and less fragmented to represent the personal which interfaced with the singular public image of the figures. It occurred to me that I could simply paint these blocks of text and treat them as I would any other painted, visual component of the image. It is a simple and obvious idea, one that might have seemed insufficient had the unorthodox idea of using text as a visual element in painting not been previously introduced by artists such as Vernon Fisher. His approach was necessarily more deliberate and palpable, sanding through the ground or canvas to create a hole in the shape of the actual letters which lends the text a three dimensional physicality. It is interesting that both of our approaches--sanding and painting--have a similar look that references the typewriter. The punching of the typewriter keys onto the paper compromises the crisp edges between letter and ground. Fisher's approach extends this act to the physical result of puncturing the ground while my wet into wet painting is pure simulation.

Other predecessors who used text in painting include Neil Jenny who included the title of the painting as a caption within the frame around the painting. Ed Ruscha has made paintings that treat single words as an image, reconfiguring the text into an image (like his painting of beans) resulting in some kind of visual onomatopoeia. Christopher Wool also forces letters to become images by crowding his text into severe vertical picture planes. This format impedes the reading of the text and thereby delays the understanding of the narrative. This strategy insists upon the primacy of the visual.

I believe the caption/illustration function is reinforced in my earlier paintings with the autobiographical narratives and diminished in the later paintings with the closed-caption sequences. Because the narrative was longer and less fragmented in the former, the text resulted in the block shapes that I placed very consciously to fit around the image of the figures. In the latter work, the closed-caption sequence suggested not only the larger and more intrusive placement of the text borders but also encouraged the shift from autobiography to the anonymous dialogue, sound effects, and descriptors of broadcast television. I don't know that the actual form of the text fragments should strictly mimic the form of the closed-caption sequences as seen on television. I did change the font I was using to something that resembles the font used by this system, and I added the arrow symbols to introduce the text. At the same time, I reserve the right to alter this format to ultimately better serve the end result of the painting. (The reversal of the letter and ground colors is just one example.) I find people do not automatically identify the closed-caption reference. I don't feel this necessarily results in a diminished appreciation for the effect of combining language, sound, and image, a combination that is often thought to exist exclusively within the realm of stage, film, and television.

It seems obvious now that I would be attracted to television news as a source for paintings that investigate the meaning of language and images. What literary or artistic form would tolerate such unabashed illustration of narrative? Yet, other considerations begin to enter this primary impetus. I tend to want to avoid the more notorious images such as the repeated one of Osama bin Laden crouched and shooting a machine gun, and infamous rhetoric such as President Bush's recent inflammatory phrasing "axis of evil." My apprehensions with pop art notwithstanding however, I have to consider whether some of the imagery that seems so notorious now (Ed Paschke's use of the infamous photograph of Lee Harvey Oswald brandishing a rifle or Andy Warhol's silkscreened

images of Marilyn Monroe and Mick Jagger) was really received as such at the time. Nostalgia has certainly played a role in my reception of these images; they had no meaning for me when they occurred because they existed before my time. I can be sure that my recognizable images of Tom Brokaw, Afghan women, and the stageset of *Jerry Springer* will take on new meanings as time passes.

Another tangential concern is the extent to which these paintings could take on more of a political agenda. Here I must consider the work of Leon Golub whose paintings of mercenaries cropped up in the midst of the Vietnam War and referenced news images of the time. These images differ from mine in that they seem of a more covert nature, almost as if they were taken from some photojournalistic expose (and perhaps they were). The images are also transformed by a graphic treatment. They are stylized in their drawn and painted presentation, and it is never questioned that they do not reside within this domain. My paintings seem much more of the public realm. Not only are they painted more straightforwardly, these images are available to the public. They are presented in our homes on a daily basis in the form of a constant flow; consequently, there is something a bit more banal (though no less sinister) in this source of the television news still and its recognizability in my paintings.

The possibility of juxtaposing an image from one context with the text of another situation is yet another domain I will continue to explore. Sometimes this juxtaposition works as an ironic pun, as in *Exhale*, which pairs the military jargon extrapolated from an interview of Senator John McCain by Jay Leno right after September 11 with a still from *Jerry Springer*. The image provides comic relief to the actual horrific outcome of what Senator McCain aptly labeled a failure of human intelligence, though he was referring to this capacity as a manifestation of the CIA. Despite my nagging concerns about political correctness and sensitivity, I made this painting at the end of a period of shock, paranoia,

and despair which most Americans surely experienced as a reaction to this unprecedented event in our society. This painting, along with *Siren* and *Stand & Deliver*, documents, I now realize, my management of this traumatic situation. I make no judgement about this reaction but wouldn't reject the comparison to how and when humor returned to *The Tonight Show* and *David Letterman* which rely on current events in their monologues. I also took note of how another comedian and talk show host's reaction (Bill Mawr of *Politically Incorrect*) was rejected and censored.

I think juxtaposition as a device more generally serves my interest in the slice of life genre. It also speaks to the mosaic capacity of the MTV montage (Dancyger 1997) which encompasses sound, movement, and image to blend an array of subject matter: people (famous and unknown), culture (ethnic, age and socio-economic) and geography (national and global). This mosaic quality alludes to the fragmentary nature of our memory and consciousness as it is spiked by the overloaded stimulus of the information age.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

Where dock worker's dreams/mix with panther's schemes to/someday own the rodeo...

Bruce Springsteen, "Does This Bus Stop at 82nd Street?"

In the end, I believe the meaning of painting with television images speaks to the human need to construct our own version of reality. Whether it is the perception of interaction some experience by going to the movies or watching television, or the increased probability that we can, in fact, through the explosion of reality TV and expanded definitions of news coverage, (I myself have been filmed for television at least three times in my life that I know of, none of which were actually aired) claim the fifteen minutes of fame Andy Warhol predicted would be granted to each of us. It is the ordinary people we see on television-- talk show guests, audience members, "Jay walking" interviewees from *The Tonight Show*, or groupies waking up at all hours of the early morning to stand outside the broadcast studio of *Today*, who most unabashedly embrace this desire.

I am reminded of the early songwriting of Bruce Springsteen and how I totally dig his need to transform ordinary people into mythic creatures. In his first album (1973) a young Hispanic woman suffering from a cold while riding on the subway becomes a "se-orita, spanish rose" who anticipates her arrival uptown to greet her boyfriend ("throw a rose to some lucky young matador"). A factory worker from Jersey on the weekends becomes "Jimmy the Saint" by racing his "Chevy stock super eight" which of course has "Bound for Glory on the side in red, white and blue flash paint." I think we all have some part of us that still believes we are bound for glory or at least that we will someday

own the rodeo.

I learned much about my own work and its agendas by reviewing the music of this artist. His early music (1972-4) with its focus on storytelling and the sheer delight in rhyming the language to synch with the rhythm of the music is priceless to me. These quirky observations of human behavior become all out romantic anthems in his mid-career albums (1975-82). This music was the soundtrack of both my angst as a first generation college student and my insecurities with the Houston art community. I turned away from these albums some as I became older and a little more cynical, but they have recently returned to my favor. The break-out career albums of his latter output (1983-present) embrace a political agenda and sanctimony that have always alienated my reception, resulting ultimately in my rejection of this portion of his music. This does raise an interesting rhetorical question: Must the raising of one's political consciousness always result in the articulation of a platform? It certainly did with my first employment of news images in painting.

Another valid comparison is to the great nineteenth century artist Francisco Goya. Much debate still surrounds this complex oeuvre of genre paintings, court portraits, the infamous *Black Paintings*, and the celebrated graphic series of *Los Caprichos*, *Disasters of War*, and *Disparates*. It is confounding to reconcile a tragic and patriotic image such as *The Third of May* or of the many gruesome images from the *Disasters of War* with absurdities such as a pair of girls balancing inverted chairs on their heads as if this was the latest fashion import. Another plate displays donkeys riding astride men, an inversion of the expected hierarchy of mount and master. I believe Goya's interest in the carnival and inverted order (Coderch and Stoichita 1999) is similar to my interest in *Jerry Springer* where people who normally would garner no clout in our society are suddenly empowered to a certain degree. This interest was probably initiated by my experience as

a teacher where I was confronted with an inverted power structure that was unlike what I had experienced only ten years earlier as a student in the public schools. I was angered and frustrated but at the same time fascinated and impressed with the ways in which this so-called disenfranchised population of inner city, minority children wielded such extraordinary power.

So, like Bruce, I went through my period of consciousness-raising and its manifestation in my art as romantic and then didactic. My experience was something of a reversal of his in that I had to go through such a lengthy process to end up at this acceptance of the human experience he so playfully celebrates at the beginning of his career. Francisco Goya comprehensively recorded this throughout his oeuvre.

There has always been an expectation that artists should make art that educates and civilizes (Licht 1979). This was operating in the genre painting of Goya's contemporaries, for example, the French painter Jean-Baptiste Greuze. In more recent times, this expectation has been present in the feminist and political art from the 1970's to the present day. I think its presence is felt in the political correctness of the times as well.

I believe my art is one that must encompass all the attributes of human nature, and this includes controversial and sometimes offensive impulses. I don't feel the need to mollify as such with a political agenda that professes to teach right from wrong. My art is for grown ups. And that's not an apology for the exploitative, lascivious, profane, or violent content that may crop up in my work. My art is for those who probe the human experience in a way that refuses to deny, censor, or correct the more ignoble aspects of human thought, expression, and behavior. It is something like unconditional love, this acceptance of humankind, and it can be met with sorrow and regret or celebrated with humor. This is probably best expressed by the following emblem, which still applies

today though it originally surfaced in the sixteenth century:

At this miserable century
Heraclitus fittingly wept
While Democritus, prudently,
At this very same century mocked.
Two contrary effects produced
By the same cause in two different men
Of which one wept and the other guffawed
At the sight of the same events
And thus in our present century
Reasons to weep there are many
As are the reasons to laugh (Coderch and Stoichita 1999).

I must say I feel more complete and honest since leaving Heraclitus's pity party to perform in Democritus's carnival. (And I tend to get more laughs.) This gets back to the real theme of this project which is that of viewer's choice: Give the people what they want! Ultimately, it is their choice as to whether or not they should watch, and if so, what they tune into and how they make meaning of it. I'm sure they will make the right decision, but if they don't, I will love them anyway.

ILLUSTRATIONS





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